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/889/ The Lepcha Legend of the Building of the Tower

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114 Part of the legendary material of the peoples living in the maharajah state of Sikkim at the foot of the Central Himalayas has already been treated by various people, and also a number of traditions of the Lepchas—the largest group of the original inhabitants of this territory—have been mentioned in numerous publications. (1)

1. Cf. Kali Kumar Das, "The Lepcha people and their notions of heaven and hell," Journal of the Buddhist Texts Society (Calcutta) Volume VI (1896). —C. de Beauvoir-Stocks, "Folk-lore and customs of the Lap-chas of Sikhim," Journal and Proceedings, Asiatic Society of Bengal, N. S. 21 (1925). — G. Gorer, Himalayan Village (London, 1938). — J. Morris, Living with Lepchas (London, 1938).

114 T3 Singularly enough, however, one of the legends best known among the Lepchas has not received—with the exception of two brief references—closer treatment in any of the pertinent works that have appeared to date: this is a tradition that tells of the unsuccessful project of the Lepcha people to construct a tower of clay pots reaching the vault of heaven.

172 114 One of the reasons for the survival of this legend is the circumstance that at the supposed site of the tower potsherds have been dug

114 up from time to time by the local population while working in the
172 fields. Two decades ago these findings aroused the attention of a specialist; Sir Charles Bell, at that time Political Officer of Sikkim, had several of the discovered fragments brought to him, and at his direction the legend of the tower was also put down in writing. Unfortunately, however, this material never received a proper evaluation. —Through the courtesy of Sri T. N. Pulger, the owner of the Daramdin estate, within whose boundaries the site of the legendary tower building is situated today, I was able to obtain a reproduction of the report written for Sir Charles Bell and to take it into account in the present work.

/890/ 1. First Version

773 Most Lepchas who know the legend of the tower building are convinced that this enterprise was carried out by the original ancestors of the Lepcha people. This view is also expressed in the following Lepcha text which is reproduced first in orthographic transcription and then in translation.

/Lepcha text follows./ (2)

2. The text was translated with the kind assistance of Pastor T. S. Targain (Kalimpong).

The Story of the Ta-lom Plain

539 Long, long ago, when the creation of the world was completed,
773 the Lepcha people, increasing in number after its creation, descended from /891/ the glacier mountain, (3) and the land of Ma-yel (4) was

3. According to legend, the Lepcha people had its origin on the mountain of Kanchenjunga, from whose glacial ice the original ancestral couple is supposed to have been created.

4. Concerning the land of Ma-yel cf. Gorer, Himalayan Village, p. 235 f.

113 dwelling place; this marriage produced four sons and three daughters,
539 who, however, were apparently absorbed in the families of the neighboring Limbu. Thus the tribe of Na ong was finally completely extinguished.

113 The place where, according to the legend, the construction of the tower was undertaken is a plateau about two kilometers square situated in the western part of Sikkim, near the Indian-Nepalese border. To the west it is screened by a chain of mountains; to the south and the northeast it is bounded by two rivers. In the deeply fissured landscape of the Himalayan foothills a level plain of such proportions is a great rarity, and hence the plateau is clearly visible from a distance. It was subsequently transformed almost completely into a rice field, and only its extreme eastern corner, which bears the name Phugamdin and where — according to the legend —the first settlement of the Na ong arose, is uncultivated and today serves as a burial place for the Limbus, who recently settled in this part of Sikkim. (8)

8. A scholarly work on the burial methods of the Limbus — as well as an exhaustive investigation of this tribe — has unfortunately not yet been written. According to reports available up to now, the Limbu dead are generally buried, but sometimes cremated. Without doubt, however, the potsherds discovered in Daramdin cannot be grave-goods of the Limbus, for the Lepchas, who are sufficiently aware of the customs of this neighboring tribe — would in this case have ascribed no special significance to such findings.

●172 While people are farming on the plateau — especially during the spring plowing — potsherds are constantly discovered; understandably enough, these findings are connected by the local inhabitants to the legend of the tower. Despite repeated questioning I still have not yet succeeded in obtaining some of the findings for closer examination; apparently the unearthed fragments are heedlessly thrown away by the populace.

/895/ The conditions which prevail at present in the Tibetan-Indian border region make it impossible, for the time being, to undertake any extensive investigation on the spot, and particularly any systematic excavations. I must therefore limit myself here to the observation that, according to the statement of the local inhabitants,

172 the fragments reveal a clearly convex shape and seem to come from uncommonly strong pots made of baked clay. Until now I have been unable to determine whether other objects such as bones, tools, weapons, etc. are occasionally also found along with the fragments.

3. Explanations

773 172 In conclusion, after a short summary, I should like to attempt a few explanations of what has been said above. —The stories that occur among many peoples of the world dealing with the Flood and the building of a tower reaching to the sky also belong to the oldest and most strongly rooted traditions of the Lepchas. The current version of the legend of the tower building places the site on the plateau of Laramdin. As a proof, so to speak, of the correctness of this tradition, it is cited that right up to the present day the fragments of the pots from which the tower supposedly was built can be found here. Yet it seems questionable to me whether the doubtlessly very old tower legend was always brought into connection with the discoveries made in Daramdin. I suspect rather that the first potsherd discoveries were made in the course of the more intensive farming carried out in this region during the last hundred years; these soon brought about a corresponding variation of the legend. Supporting this assumption is a remark contained in G. B. Mainwaring's A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language (Calcutta, 1876), one of the oldest publications about the Lepchas. The relevant passage, found on page XX of the Introduction, states: "On the top of the lofty Sung li hlo, it is said, a foolish class of Lepchas (Na ong), now extinct, endeavoured to raise a building high enough to reach the heavens. Rocks and blocks of stones as the ruins are shown on the place."

As is evident, in this version of the legend, written down more than seven decades ago, neither the plateau of Daramdin nor the use of clay pots is mentioned, and the place of the action is moved to the mountain Sung li hlo in the vicinity of Darjeeling.

172 It will be possible to give an absolutely sound explanation of the type and date of the discovered vessel fragments only after an intensive investigation of a large number of the findings. Possibly the potsherds stem from an early settlement that later was lost to oblivion. — The protected plateau would have offered a very favorable spot for such a settlement. Likewise it would not be out of the question that these settlers were Lepcha sibs or a people closely related to them, who used clay vessels as household objects.

114 323 /896/ In this connection, to be sure, I must supplement the assertion concerning the pottery of the Lepcha which is found in G. Gorer's Himalayan Village (London, 1938), p. 67. As is stated in the above work, the generation of Lepchas living today in the reservation of Zongu has no knowledge of the art of pottery. Consequently copper, brass and porcelain pots of Nepalese, Chinese or even Western origin are used in their households; this statement corresponds to the observations I made among some of the Lepchas living outside the reservation. In addition, however, I was also able to find out that only two generations ago the art of pottery was practiced by a few men experienced in this trade, who on their part supplied the other [437] tribe members with the products of their work by way of barter. Their activity, to be sure, seems to have been limited to the manufacture of a type of vessel which was formerly used among the Lepchas. [415] These vessels called Tang ling fyŭ tyók generally had no handle and a short neck, and were rounded out most in the bottom third; at their broadest point they were about 30 centimeters in diameter. They were made of clay without the aid of a potter's wheel and were then baked. A few of these vessels are reputedly in use in a few remote places in Sikkim.

172 764 Also, the idea that the potsherds might come from urns or grave goods should not be completely disregarded. Should this assumption prove to be correct, then it is possible that the former settlers were not Lepchas, for insofar as I have been able to ascertain on the basis of my investigations of the old burial practices of the Lepchas, cremation of the dead and disposal of the ashes in urns or the practice of placing jugs containing food in the grave was not customary among the Lepchas. (9)

9. Cf. R. Nebesky de Wojkowitz, "Ancient funeral ceremonies of the Lepchas," Eastern Anthropologist (Lucknow), 5, (1951).

4. Supplement

172 Only a short time after this article had gone to press, I succeeded in obtaining a few of the potsherds discovered in the region of Daramdin. In the majority of cases these were small fragments with edges that had already been greatly worn down. They consisted of clay shot through with mica. They vary according to the

● 172 degree of baking between a reddish brown and gray black in color. The pieces come from vessels of the most varied sizes: from small, thin walled bowls with a flared edge as well as also from larger containers with a wall several centimeters thick. Possibly the findings stem from various strata, for in part of them we are dealing with fragments of vessels prepared with the aid of a potter's wheel, whereas others are remnants of crude, thick-walled pots shaped by hand. /897/ By far the greater number of the findings reveal no ornamentation at all. Only on a few pieces there are three stripes of a dark color which run horizontally on the outer edge of the mouth of the vessel; one small item shows a vague, uncolored, serrated pattern [Wolfszahnmuster] that was scratched into the surface.

Concerning the settlement of the Daramdim Plateau I was also able to obtain a little information from the members of the Limbu people who live in this region. According to them, Limbu farmers cleared at the beginning of the nineteenth century the virgin forest that covered great portions of this high plateau. In the course of this work they ran across a ruined stone tower which they carried away in order to make room for a field. —It seems here to be a question of one of the old stone watchtowers, a few of which even today are still standing in this part of the Nepalese-Tibetan border region. They are possibly fortifications from the time of the Great Tibetan Kingdom (9th century A. D.).

The local Limbus assert further that even in the valleys of the two rivers bordering the Daramdin estate potsherds are frequently found washed down there from the plateau by the rain.

magic. Also included in the collection were a few urn fragments discovered after superficial excavations on the plateau of Daramdin in West Sikkim during the investigation of one version of the Lepcha legend of the building of a tower; the findings, a few of which reveal band and serrated /Wolfszahnmuster/ patterns, possibly stem from the time of the Great Tibetan Kingdom (9th century A.D.).

As for hunting and war weapons, the collection has several bows of varying size and type—among them a bow-sling used for hunting birds—, arrows, hunting poisons, bushknives, an old sword, and a round war shield of cane. Among the various fishing implements, a large casting net made of nettles deserves special mention.

It was also possible to acquire three of the rare old manuscripts written in the Lepcha script that is derived from the Tibetan alphabet; also copies of a few Lepcha books and of several wedding songs were made.

/271/ The Lepcha collection comprising 93 different objects is supplemented by a few objects of Bhutanese origin that are likewise used by the Lepchas (strips of weaving, a war shield of rhinoceros skin, small rice baskets with characteristic bright-colored patterns). The collection is further supplemented by about 300 color and black and white photographs as well as tape recordings of songs of the Lepchas and two of their neighbors, the Gurkhas and Tamang. Thanks to the friendly helpfulness of the leader of the third Danish Central Asia Expedition, His Royal Highness Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark—who is likewise to be thanked for making it possible to ship the collections to Europe in an especially favorable way—the accessible ethnographic material concerning the Lepchas was also enriched by color photographs of the costumes and dances of this tribe.

Concerning the objects stemming from the Tibetan area, we are dealing above all with ceremonial objects, which serve to supplement the Tibetan Collection already present in the museum: an almost three meter high "thread cross of the Ma mo demonesses" (Ma moi mdos), which is used as a demon trap in weather conjuring, thread amulets, paraphernalia for performing various ceremonies of the Lamas, a valuable old scroll painting (thang ka) depicting the mountain divinity g Nyan chhen thang lha, a scroll painting with pictures of the founder of the Karmapa sect—Dus gsum mkhyen po and his disciples; further, three thang ka with depictions of the oracle divinities that are relatively rarely portrayed on Tibetan scroll